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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAKU 000773

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SUBJECT: IRANIAN STUDENTS IN BAKU SPEAK OUT

REF: NONE

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Classified By: Acting DCM Rob Garverick

11. (C) SUMMARY The Iranian public is keen for more opportunities to engage with the United States. Three Iranian students studying in Baku conveyed this sentiment to polecon officer during two wide-ranging discussions on life in Iran. Polecon officer outlined the ways the USG reaches out to the Iranian people, and the students insisted the United States should do even more to support them. The students offered their views on other Iran-related issues. They spoke of the popularity among Iranian youth to study abroad; told of the Iranian public disgust for the government and growing apathy toward religion; conveyed little faith that Iran would change its nuclear policy; and expressed concern among Iranians the US would soon "attack" Iran. The students also described the government's campaign to raise Persian awareness while increasingly repressing minorities.

Background to students interviewed  
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12. (C) On August 7 and 12, polecon officer met with three Iranian students currently attending university in Baku. Two were 21-year old men, Samir and Azar, working on politics and international economic degrees respectively. The third, a 22 year-old woman, Nijar, is studying medicine. The students are Azeri-Iranians, one from Tabriz and two from Ardebil and their time in Baku has ranged from one to three years All three travel back to Iran periodically to see family and friends. These students did not know each other until meeting in Baku. Two of the students consider themselves political activists, promoting the rights of the Azeri-Iranian population in Iran.

The press for more people-to-people exchange  
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13. (C) The students said the USG should do "a lot" more to reach out to the Iranian people, who are "eager" for exchange with Americans. The students said the current radio programs like Voice of America (VOA)-Persian, Radio Farda, and Radio Free Europe have limited audiences for a few reasons. According to Araz, the frequencies used for these broadcasts are spotty and do not reach large swaths of Iran. Samir argued the radio programs "fail" to resonate with Iranians because the programs are irrelevant to them. The programming does not focus enough on the government's domestic failings and does not adequately promote western values and explain why Iranians should want them. Araz said he was particularly frustrated with US and western media sources scant coverage of the government's increasingly repressive policies toward minorities. He asked why no one covered the major May 22, 2006 uprising by ethnic Azeris in the north or the government crackdown that followed. According to Araz and Samir, these were the largest protests since the revolution days. Araz

added, no one is speaking out against the increasing number of cases of human rights abuses that Baluchis and Arabs have faced in the past several months. Nijar stated that while these stations can serve as a good source of information, radio is no longer a very popular source for information. She said Iranians watch satellite television, seek out good DVDs, surf the internet, and rely on text messaging. That said, the U.S. should use these mediums to target the Iranian audience.

14. (C) Polecon officer asked the students to submit a list of suggestions for improving/increasing US-Iran ties. A few of their ideas are provided below.

--TV programs or documentaries that feature Iranian US-citizens. These citizens would discuss why they left Iran, why they enjoy living in the US, and how the US has provided them many opportunities not available in Iran.

--US through local organizations set up American cultural centers in cities around the world where Iranians citizens are residing. These centers should offer English courses and opportunities to go the USG, provide democracy and human rights education, and feature events that promote US-Iranian ties.

--Fund internet sites that target Iranian young by providing pop music, fashion types, celebrity stories and other things considered "modern and cool."

--Revamp radio programs to address a wide-range of Iranian domestic issues and promote western values.  
Iranians keen to study abroad  
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15. (C) The students said young Iranians are "very interested" in studying overseas and their government does not discourage them from pursuing this "dream." The GOI does, however, have its preferences. Tehran encourages their young citizens to study in France, Russia, Greece, Syria, and Armenia. When asked why these nations, the woman said there were a couple of reasons. In terms of Russia and France, Iran has a long tradition of sending students to these states and both are seen as providing world-class education. The GOI also views educational exchanges with all five nations as key to advancing their national interests as all five are considered by Iran as strategic partners. In any cases, students receive government support to attend universities in these states. There is a particularly good scholarship program for Iranians that study in Armenia. According to Samir and later supported by a local human rights organization, about 10,000 Iranians are provided financial support to study in Yerevan.

16. (C) The Araz chimed in that Iran also uses these exchanges for intelligence purposes, as some students are recruited to spy for the Iranian state while overseas. The woman, quickly added that while she believed the regime uses students for such purposes, the espionage was not against host governments but rather fellow students. She estimated that of the approximately 5000 university students studying in Azerbaijan about one-third of them, are sent by the government to monitor fellow students.

17. (C) Iran is particularly concerned with Iranians studying in Azerbaijan and Turkey as the majority of the Iranian students are of Turkic background rather than of Persian-origin. The GOI believes these students are most vulnerable to becoming political activists that threaten the "great Persian nation" of Iran. According to Samir, the government discourages students from going to Turkey and Azerbaijan. They publicize that Turkey is crime-ridden and has a high rate of HIV infection. They also use the tactic of not recognizing certain degrees from either state.

The government of disgrace,  
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18. (C) On the subject of politics, all three expressed disgust with the Iranian government. Samir blurted out thanks to our leaders, Iran is the "grave yard of democracy." He added the revolution was about freedom but after it ended, "we gained nothing." Araz lamented that after seizing power, Ayatollah Khomeini and his government quickly reverted to repressive "Shah-era tactics," when they were not executing "the progressive intelligentsia" they were focused on enriching themselves and their friends.

19. (C) When asked their thoughts on the current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, all three smirked and rolled their eyes. Nijar stated "if we want a crisis, he is the right man to lead us to it," while Samir just grimaced and said everyone thinks the man is "simple-headed." When asked for comment on a recent poll that suggested that a majority of Iranians would vote for him again in the 2009 elections, Samir shrugged and said, it seems reasonable. He surmised that people interviewed were either scared to speak the truth for fear of official retribution or they said yes because they know their opinion does not matter anyway, a positive response is more like saying whatever., Nijar added no one believes their vote in the upcoming election will count. The winner is always decided by a few elite factions that are close to the supreme leader.

10. (C) On the subject of the government,s nuclear program, Samir said not many Iranians believe the government would build a nuclear weapon. He also said the people do not believe the government will stop its enrichment activities as they believe it is the "righteous" thing to do. The three students projected the current "talks" will fail and Iran will accept more sanctions. Many Iranians believe the USG is planning to attack Iran over the issue. On the subject of impact of sanctions, the students believe the economy is weakening but the average person is impacted as the government leaders always finds ways to make money and stay wealthy. All thought the economy is getting worse for the average citizen, not only because of sanctions but as a result of poor government economic policy. According to Araz, "we are not competitive in any field but oil." He went on to add, ten years ago, the people could buy a new computer, now they can barely afford a used-one.

Iranians are not "religious fanatics,  
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11. (C) The students said that Iranians are not the "religious fanatics" that the government portrays them as to the outside world. To make this point, Samir reported that Iranians increasingly do not attend Friday prayer or visit mosques during other times of the week. Nijar said people spurn religious television shows and certainly "do not avoid alcohol or cigarettes." This is particularly the case among young Iranians. Nijar said many of her friends may act religious in front of their elders and in public, but among friends they are just like other youth in Turkey or here (Baku). They want to be modern-- dressing in the latest fashions, listening to Turkish pop music, going on dates, dancing in clubs, and expressing our opinions openly.

12. (C) Araz said the fading religiosity, stems from citizens, general disillusion of the government. Amedinejad,s regime has increasingly used religion as an excuse to crack down on citizens, basic rights such as freedom of "expression, dress, and political activity." The repression is especially targeted at minorities. And in terms of the "clerics," many are viewed as corrupt and only interested in enriching themselves with Iran,s natural

resources wealth.

¶13. (C) Araz also said the regime relies on religion as a foreign policy tool. To maintain good relations with conservative Muslim states, Tehran plays the religious card, supporting the Palestinian cause, cursing Jews as "dogs" and the U.S. as "satan," and supporting an array of Shia religious causes overseas. Samir added the GOI is a hypocrite when it comes to promotion of religion as Tehran supports secular countries like Russia and when it comes to the Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran supports Christian Armenia rather than its Muslim brother Azerbaijan.

Access to outside information debated  
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¶14. (C) When asked the extent to which the government restricts citizens, access to outside media or internet, Nijar and Ali were not in total agreement. Nijar said the government is always looking to clamp down on Iranians access to outside sources of information while Ali said the government does not really care what citizens do behind closed doors as long as it does not threaten the regime. He stated, we can "drink vodka and have prostitutes," watch satellite television and surf the internet without much interference. Araz agreed with Samir, adding the government is particularly lenient toward Persian dominated cities like Tehran, Qom, and Shiraz. Nijar jumped in saying that while outside information may be available, the government takes measures to disrupt and limit access by jamming satellites and applying filters to internet sites. She agreed with the others who stressed the citizens are "very clever" about getting around the censoring methods and the point made by Samir that the government has all but given up trying to remove satellites.

It,s all about being Persian in Iran  
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¶15. (C) According to the students, the government is focused on raising Persian awareness in Iran. While the government emphasized the importance of religion to the state in the eighties, since the nineties, it seems promoting Persian "greatness" to the people is a higher priority. As an example of this trend, Samir pointed to the regime,s recent release of a new rial note that interprets a passage from the Koran as saying something along the lines of "it is only the Persian who can solve the most complex scientific problems."

¶16. (C) The three students agreed the Persian nationalism message has resonated with the Persian population. They said discrimination against non-Persians by Persians was just as bad among the youth as among the older population. Araz added the regime also has successfully pitted minorities against other minorities as a way to ensure the groups do not join as one against the government.

Crackdown on minorities increasing  
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¶17. (C) This emphasis on Persian nationalism has coincided with a crackdown on minorities, according to the students. They said since the rise of Amedinejad, Iranian minorities have faced increased harassment from the police and many have faced detention and interrogations. Araz said, as an Azeri, he has been victim. He was detained for six weeks for his participation in the May 22, 2006 demonstration against the government for publishing a demeaning caricature of

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Azeris. He was not tortured or treated badly but he is still interrogated every time he travels back to Iran. Araz expressed his frustration with USG and its media "failure" to cover Iran,s increasing atrocities against minorities.

¶18. (C) COMMENT: It was encouraging to hear three young Iranians express a strong desire for democratic ideals and an interest in American society. It was, however, depressing to listen to these students express little faith that their government will change any time soon to allow Iranians basic freedoms and end their isolation from the international community. Even if policies are changed, it seems, based on these students, comments, it will take years to undo the damage done by thirty years of repression, discrimination against non-Persians, scant civil society, and general economic failings. Of course, opinions expressed in this report are likely swayed by the fact these students are ethnic Azeris from northern Iran and not Persian. That said, post will continue to seek opportunities to meet with Iranians of all ethnic backgrounds particularly as different groups' perspectives on life in Iran may vary. We also will continue to convey recommendations Iranians offer for advancing US-Iranian people-to-people exchange. From discussions with these students, it seems the USG can and should do more to reach the Iranian people-particularly the young- through the development of new and improved outreach programs.

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